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THE BARNABITES

Manual of history and spirituality
of the Order of Clerics Regular
of St. Paul Beheaded

Chapter 17

THE ECUMENISM OF FR. ŠUVALOV AND FR. TONDINI

"Russia will be catholic"

Four years after the death of Fr. Augustine Šuvalov (1804-1859), in an inscription, found on his tomb we read: "Russia will be catholic." For this cause the great Russian Barnabite had offered himself as a victim. "If the prize of the ransom is pour out, the day of freedom will one day come for the empire," he told himself.

In a memorable meeting with the pope - Father narrates- "Pius IX spoke to me of Russia with that faith, with that hope, with that belief that have as support the words of Jesus, and with that ardent charity which was moving him thinking of his wayward children, poor volunteers orphans."

Father Šuvalov declared himself ready, from that moment, to make the sacrifice of his life for the conversion of his native land. "Now, the Holy Father said, always repeat before the Crucifix three times a day this protest; be sure: your wish will be fulfilled." It was like an official delivery. He could well understand the sorry state of his separated brethren of the East, and could feel a deep desire for their return. His life in fact, gone through some most varied religious experiences, in a passionate search for the truth, bears witness to the hardship and difficulties of those who were not in full communion with the Catholic Church.

The dogma of the Unity

A dissolute youth had led Augustine Šuvalov away from any religious belief. The passing of the years and the death of that chosen creature who was his wife Sofia, "threw in his soul a healthy agitation which put him on the healing path." Then the arduous ascent for the conquest of the truth started: "Happy, happy hundred times that day when I found out that the recognition of the truth has to be conquered through virtue. The more we go forward in the path of goodness, the stronger we become in our faith."

He turned first to the Orthodox and the Protestant Confessions. If the last one could seem more reasonable, he immediately saw in it "something so arid and petty, with which his heart could not be satisfied." More severe will later be his judgment: "Protestantism by breaking down what it calls the form, has wounded religion in its heart, destroying the authority and the essence of Catholicism." Neither luckier was the momentary return to the religion of his childhood. Soon he noticed that "although the separated Church possesses almost everything that the Catholic possesses, it possesses it in a state of death."

The idea that determined Augustine to join the Catholic Church, recognized as the "sole" to be authentic, became clear "in the midst of this distressing anarchy of faith: no evidence is more appropriate to prove the truth and the need of the Catholic unity!" He then understood that "the truth was one, and truth and unity are the same thing. If there is only one God, there can be only one faith and one doctrine, there can only be one true Church... What changed my ideas – it is always Father talking - was the recognition and acceptance of the dogma of the unity; there is one truth, and therefore there can be only one religion." The step from "the dogma of unity" and the acceptance of authority was a short one. "I saw that authority and unity were two indispensable conditions of truth: authority derives from the unity and unity is the result of the authority."

The prejudices against the Catholic Church fell apart. He did not think anymore of the Church of Christ "as a building with many chapels;… he no longer believed as good all religions"; finally he understood that "*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus!*" It was time for the solemn abjuration. On January 6, 1843 Augustine Šuvalov became a Catholic. "Holy Church of Jesus Christ, temple of the true God, ark of salvation! A man, when he does not know you, can practice some kind of virtue, can acquire some kind of happiness; but I am convinced that only in your Church, O Lord, he can reach the perfection to which you want him to aspire. Because she alone generates the saints; her faith, her doctrine, her practice, the whole, so to speak, of her life is necessary to attain holiness."

Fr. Šuvalov's work

"I approached the Holy Table and found myself next to a young seventeen year old who was about to enter the Congregation of the Barnabites. At the moment of receiving the Body of our Lord, a thought flashed in my mind and I said to myself: this young man is, then, about to give himself to you, my God! An only child, he leaves his family, his heritage, his future ... and I, at fifty, I will not have this courage?"

It was September 8, 1855. Between Augustine Šuvalov and Caesar Tondini an exchange of providential gifts had occurred. The great convert will become a Barnabite, while the young man will inherit from him the mission to bring Russia within the Catholic unity. He made this the purpose of his life. He will write in his diary, shortly before becoming a priest: "My soul needs a purpose, a goal, otherwise it will wander around restless and distracted. The thought of the conversion of Russia serves admirably to fix my spirit on a holy object and respondent to the needs of my heart. I find there also a very effective stimulus to virtue and perfection. Convinced of the power that prayer has on the Heart of God, and also persuaded that it is most effective when it comes from a holy heart; I feel excited to spare nothing to attain perfection ... May God then grant to my prayers the conversion of Russia."

On the day of the ordination, at the elevation of the chalice he raised this supplication to God (which later he will repeat three times a day): "My God, make me worthy to give my life and my blood in union with yours for the glorification of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin in the conversion of Russia."

Prayer, the return of Russia, the intercession of the Immaculate! On this basis was to be born the "Association of prayers for the triumph of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin in the conversion of the Eastern schismatics, and especially the Russians, to the Catholic faith," commonly called the "Fr. Šuvalov's Work", whose animator and propagator was Fr. Tondini.

Association of prayers

He reports: "for many years, perhaps since 1848, in the Monza novitiate, the novices were used to recite in the evening a special prayer to Mary Immaculate for the return of Russia to Catholicism. When the count Šuvalov entered the novitiate and heard it for the first time, was deeply moved. "Certainly he was responsible for the inspiration of the Work, if Fr. Tondini could later affirm: "From Fr. Šuvalov, as a sacred legacy, we have welcomed the thought of the return of Russia to the Catholic unity and the desire to cooperate in this endeavor; from him we had the inspiration of this association of prayers, which began with few Hail Marys and few communions ... In the mind of Fr. Šuvalov, Mary Immaculate was to be the bond to unite the two Churches, making it a people of brothers under the fatherhood of the Vicar of Christ."

Assigned, after his ordination, to Paris to establish and propagate the Association, Fr. Rondini will go to the Montpamasse cemetery where the corpse of Fr. Šuvalov was reposing, "to draw new zeal for the task!" "It is out of loyalty to this great friend – he affirmed later – that I have consecrated my life to the work of the union of the Russian Church with the Catholic Church. That was his greatest desire. He is the one who has communicated it to me. I have promised on his grave to promote it up to death."

Pius IX approved the association with the brief of September 2, 1862 (he added another in 1869) blessing its tireless creator: "May God bless you and direct your hearts and your intelligence."

From then on Fr. Rondini did not know any limit to his zeal. He traveled throughout Europe with the intent of gaining wider adherence to the Work , everywhere arousing a chorus of suppliant voices in prayer. Paray-le-Monial in particular became an important center of the Association, "there is located, in the heart of the divine Friend, the answer to the Russian question."

In Russia itself, in a convent of two hundred nuns, located near the Sea of Azov, a weekly Mass was introduced with the singing of the Litany of Our Lady for the return of the Russian Church to the unity with the Catholic Church.

The program

The Catholic Congress of Malines approved on September 4, 1867, the initiative, after listening to Father's inspired words. "... If at present there is a matter of greater interest, this is the question of religion in Russia. Our united efforts will undoubtedly obtain an effective solution, especially if we will use the safest means that reason, in agreement with faith, suggets us: prayer... The triumph of the Church, the health of Europe, is prayer… An Association of prayer proves to the whole world that we believe in the power of prayer, that we recognize God's rule over history, his government on the people, and his action guiding them by the hand."

Starting from these premises, Fr. Tondini, on January 29, 1886, illustrated the program to be followed to promote Christian unity for the separated Churches:

1) prayer;

2) elimination of the obstacles, distinguishing well what in the Church is divine and what is human;

3) to state clearly some truth abhorred by the Orthodox, but not well understood;

4) to use great charity.

Varied were especially the indirect activities that our Father held to implement his great ideal, "constant and last aim of his life - as he said - beyond which there is none but Siberia or Heaven..."

At the end of his laborious day, when every aspiration was only for Heaven, Fr. Tondini remembered with emotion the beginning of the Work: "One day I was alone in my room, immersed I do not know in what thoughts, when I felt a great and sudden emotion taking possession of my soul. Still young, I had heard of the Association of prayers for the conversion of England, established by the Venerable Father Ignatius Spencer, a Passionist. In 1862 the results of this Association were already remarkable ... What father Spencer has done for England, you should do for Russia ... These were the words that I spoke to myself? All I can say is that the memory of this moment has not yet been erased from my memory, and, I believe, will never be erased."

Apostle of the Unity

Fr. Tondini's missionary activities in favor of the Christian Unity was alive and feverish and assumed the most varied expressions.

Before mentioning some events and the most salient facts, it should be noted that the great Barnabite was able to frame the "Russian question" in a perspective that today we would recognize as almost foreboding of future events.

In 1854 Herzen wrote, "at the present time, there are only two major issues, the Russian question and the social question, and these are one." He also claimed that "Russia would solve the social question and would be established everywhere as the liberator of the working classes."

Picking the prediction of the great politician, until 1860 Fr. Tondini understood the influence Russia would have on the future. Impressed by the influence exerted by socialism, to obtain that the resolution of the social question, "forming one with the Russian question," would take place according to Christian and safe principles, he set out to work for the conversion of Russia to Catholicism, that is, the union of the Russian church with the Catholic.

But the horizon, in his mind, became even wider.

"Only by contributing mightily to the reunion of Christianity - he wrote in 1895 - Russia will draw the strength and authority needed to accomplish that mission, in view of which, if I am allowed to express an opinion on the divine plan, God has made it so powerful on the continent of Asia, I mean the evangelization of Asia." After noticing that the continuous contact with China, Japan and India, are giving to Russia, in the context of the Christian nations, a position of influence and prestige, he concludes with a vision in which vibrates his apostolic spirit: "What new horizons for the rapid conquest of Asia to the worship of the Divine Friend of the poor (social Chinese question) and of the Most Mild among the sons of men there where the Murderous reigned and is still reigning now!"

Calendar and Concordats

Not being able to play a direct action on the Russian territory, Fr. Tondini worked, so to speak, on the outskirts, in the intent to eliminate the many obstacles that had hindered the return of Russia. Concordats between the Balkan States, the question of the Julian calendar (then in force in Russia) and the Rites caught his attention as an apostle and as a scholar. (We note in passing that between books, pamphlets, articles and lectures, the Father's writings exceed 140).

"Promoting Concordats between the Holy See and the Orthodox peoples constituted for Fr. Tondini, two good aims: to be able to provide the dignity, the free exercise and development of the Catholic religion and also to put the Orthodox in contact with the Catholic Church, so that every honest soul adhering to this, with God's help would be insensibly attracted to that."

It suffices to recall, in this regard, his direct cooperation in the stipulation of the Concordat between the Holy See and Montenegro, as well as his activities as chaplain of the many Catholic groups in Serbia, Herzegovina, Bosnia and Bulgaria.

The draconian religious legislation and the calendar were isolating the Russian Church from the rest of the Christian world and for sure were not helpful to Russia itself, which was virtually cut off from the civilized world. "This giant - Fr. Tondini said - stands on two feet of clay." There were many studies and publications of our missionary to get the

Article 187 of the Russian Criminal Code (which threatened the loss of all civil rights and the exile in Siberia to those who passed from Orthodoxy to any other Christian denomination) repealed and the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, as used throughout the West. This earned him also the honor of an excommunication by the Holy Synod of St. Petersburg.

England and Sweden

Fr. Tondini's ecumenical activities were not limited to the East. He began in Scandinavia (in Stockholm and Christiania) his missionary apostolate in favor of the Christian communities and, indirectly, of the Protestants in Northern Ireland.

He was also in England, in London, where with scholarly conferences he enlightened the Anglicans on the value of tradition and papal infallibility.

In dealing with the separated brethren, in his conduct - noted Fr. Premoli, his biographer – he was always careful not to hurt but as little as possible, to properly distinguish between the wanderer and the error, and this captivated for him friends in the opposing camp, who were encouraged to take a few steps towards the Catholic Church, desiring to know and to study our authors. And it was the Anglicans who made this significant declaration: "You never said a bitter word against us."

This way of acting "*in suavitate*," as Saint Paul would say, did not displease at all the Holy See, which indeed, just at the sunset of the nineteenth century, as if to crown the intense and generous activity of our Father, appointed him as a consultor of the upcoming Pontifical Commission for the reconciliation of dissidents (1895), called for by Leo XIII. It was a kind of a Secretariat for Christian Unity *ante litteram* which included another Barnabite, Cardinal Granniello.

We conclude recalling that the Work of Fathers Šuvalov and Tondini was well accepted in the Congregation. Echo of this is a decree of the 1895 General Chapter, confirmed by as many as 10 Chapters, in which it is said: "The General Chapter wants the Work commendably initiated by the Congregation for the union of the Russian Church with the Catholic Church, to be promoted in all our houses."